

Jenny Rathbone MS
Welsh Parliament
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1SN

10th January 2024

Re. Improving outcomes for deaf babies and children: provision of Auditory Verbal therapy

Dear Ms Rathbone,

I am writing to you as the Chief Executive of charity Auditory Verbal UK (AVUK) in your capacity as the Chair of the Equality and Social Justice Committee to outline cost-benefit analysis of Auditory Verbal (AV) therapy – a highly specialist evidence-based, early intervention programme, which is transforming opportunities for deaf children in Wales whose families want them to learn to listen and speak. I wanted to share with you some further detail on the significant, long-term savings and clear health and social benefits with this approach.

We understand that AV therapy is being included in the new guidance supporting deaf children that is currently being finalised. However, we were disappointed to see that there was no funding for its provision in the Welsh Government Draft Budget 2024-25 and there is an urgent need to invest in the training of the current workforce. Given the transformative benefits that AV therapy can have, I am writing to ask that you and your Committee consider the long-term benefits of AV therapy funding when scrutinising the Draft Budget.

Working together to transform lives

With deaf children in Wales currently falling behind their hearing peers and at risk of lower academic achievement, lower employment prospects and higher risk of social exclusion, bullying and poor mental health, there has never been a more important time to invest in effective and early support to tackle the root cause of disadvantage.

There are around 270 deaf children under 5 in Wales. While Wales has one of the best Newborn Hearing Screening Programmes in the world and state of the art hearing technology (hearing aids and cochlear implants) available to babies and young people on the NHS, deaf children are not reaching their full potential and we are not currently maximising the investment being made in screening and technology. But it does not have to be this way. When deaf children have access to early and effective support, following early diagnosis and access to technology, outcomes are transformed. Early and effective support should be available for all deaf children whether their families choose to communicate with spoken language, sign language or both.

For those families who want their deaf children to learn to listen and talk, the benefits of AV therapy are clear. Around 80% of children who attend an AV therapy programme for at least two years achieve the same level of spoken language as their hearing peers, rising to 97% of children without additional needs. The majority of these children attend mainstream schools and they are attaining educational outcomes on a par with hearing children.

The full return on government investment in diagnosis and hearing technology is being realised for these children. They are getting an equal start at school and the health and education benefits are lifelong.

However, at present, over 90% of deaf children under the age 5 that could benefit from AV therapy are unable to access it. There are no qualified AV Therapists working in the NHS and local services in Wales.

But with support and investment from the Welsh Government, we can change this. With an investment of only £800,000 over the next ten years, it is possible to train a small proportion of the current public sector workforce of speech and language therapists, audiologists and teachers of the deaf to embed 12 specialist therapists in the NHS and local services in Wales. We urge you to consider taking the first steps towards making this a reality with the first tranche of funding being made available in the next financial year. By committing to one year's worth of funding for only £80,000, more deaf children can start to benefit from greater access to speech and language therapists and teachers of the deaf, trained in this specialist approach.

We are currently working with a number of speech and language therapists and teachers of the deaf across Wales who have begun their training in this specialist approach, which has been funded by charitable trusts. Two teachers of the deaf, based in North Wales are about to complete our foundation level training specialist approach but we need to expand the numbers in training to support all those who could benefit, across Wales.

The economic case for investment

Analysis across the UK shows that investment in Auditory Verbal therapy for the families of deaf children can unlock £152 million of economic benefit, rising to £11.7 billion within the next 50 years through improved quality of life, employment prospects, lower costs of schooling and avoided injuries. Other developed countries like Australia, New Zealand and Denmark already provide state funding of AV therapy and Wales should strive to match this investment.

As previously mentioned, I would ask that you will consider advocating for the inclusion of £800,000 of funding, starting with the one year commitment of only £80,000, for the provision of AV therapy across Wales in this year's Budget and that you would discuss this significant return on investment with relevant Ministerial colleagues.

I would also welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss how we can work together to support more deaf children to have the same opportunities in life as their hearing peers.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Kind regards,
Anita Grover
Chief Executive
Auditory Verbal UK

Contact via avuk@atticuscomms.com

